



LEAVING LOCKPORT

AND RETURNING TO THE CANAL'S BEGINNING

[T]he ends and ultimates of all things accord in some mean and measure with their inceptions and originals. . . . [but] all [is] hidden when we would backward see from what region of remoteness the whatness of our whoness has fetched his whenceness.

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

I became aware at an early age that the place where I lived was cloven by a ponderous, watery pit. Later, I learned to call that pit the Erie Canal and the place Lockport. A flight of locks descends here into a natural gorge, carrying boats down and up the Niagara Escarpment, a tablelike cliff that parallels Lake Ontario. The intersection of these two features, the escarpment and the canal—one carved by ancient glaciers, the other a human achievement—beckoned this town into being in a dramatic series of events over 175 years ago.

I remember people hanging over the bridge railings at Lockport, peering down into the canal, drawn to the water like Melville's "crowds of water-gazers" at the Battery.¹ Of course, Lockport's water-gazers could easily turn around and forget what lay beneath, particularly if they were on the Big Bridge, a structure that covers 399 feet of the canal. It was easy to think of that watery pit as an irrelevant vestige of the distant past. A child who didn't want to forget could follow the old towpath under the Big Bridge and sit, all alone at the heart of the city, and there perhaps ponder another subsurface mystery: the legend of the lost Lockport Cave. Under the center of the city, according to certain early reports and a century and a half of local tradition, lay a colossal cavern. A child could easily imagine that there was something hidden beneath the ordinary streets of Lockport, long lost, but once known.

Such at least were my early perceptions of the city, but later, Lockport's vertiginous terrain seemed to flatten until it assumed for me the form of a hard surface. I had become like one of the teenagers in *Wonderland*, a novel by Lockport's darkest daughter, Joyce Carol Oates. Her teenagers "strolled up and down Main Street, eager to be transformed into adults so they could escape forever the small, maddening confinement of their childhoods."² I felt further repelled by the urban renewal demolitions that had begun as I entered high school in 1964 and eventually flattened three-quarters of the city's commercial buildings. This was painful to watch. I did not know then that Lockport had rebounded from similar convulsions several times. Twice, canal enlargements had ripped broad swaths of destruction through the built landscape. Major fires had presented similar challenges; one in 1852 destroyed over thirty buildings in the center of town.³ I possessed none of this historical perspective in the late 1960s as I watched the buildings come down. Lockport looked to me like a city with its soul ripped out. My escape was college in the Midwest.

It has been almost four decades since I left Lockport, but because of family and friends, I have retained some contact with the place, visiting about twice a year. From this perspective of an exile who was still in a sense an insider, I began to notice, as time passed, certain puzzling facts. In the late 1970s, a friend who lived twenty miles west of Lockport told me about a forty-foot waterfall on the city's western edge. I thought I had explored every square inch of the town's landscape: how could there be a waterfall I had never seen nor heard any mention of by hundreds of local acquaintances?

The crest of the falls was only a few yards from a major state highway, but a high chain-link fence completely blocked access from above. I tried to approach from the south but found myself in the old city dump. Finally, I followed the creek upstream from a road crossing through a wooded ravine that local people refer to as the Gulf. Tires and metal drums lay strewn throughout the valley and creek bed. A large sewage pipe terminated directly in the stream and oozed a putrid and gaudy substance. The valley eventually narrowed to a steep-sided gorge. There, at the head of a box canyon, was the waterfall (fig. 1.1). It had been a dry period, and a small stream of water poured down into a plunge-pool, accompanied by much mist and trickling. On subsequent visits, I learned that the falls could be quite impressive after a rain (fig. 1.2). The exposed rock face was huge for so small a stream; it formed a horseshoe, like the largest falls on the escarpment. A yellow wood-frame house stood adjacent to the crest with a glazed porch extending out on brackets. Building materials and other debris tumbled down from the north side of the canyon. Large pieces of concrete, tires, and other rubbish lay scattered in the canyon and creek bed.



Figure 1.1. Indian Falls in a dry period.
Photo by author, 1993.

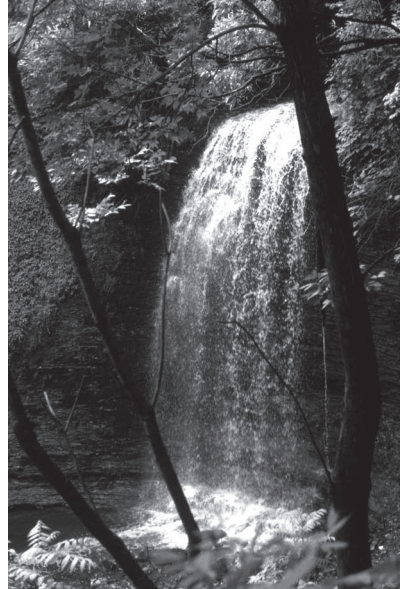


Figure 1.2. Indian Falls after a rain.
Photo by author, 1993.

The state of New York has since declared the dump and landfill a class 2 hazardous waste site. In addition to municipal waste, the site had also accepted toxic chemicals from local industries including PCBs, heavy metals, and acids. The falls itself is just outside the superfund site although the creek downstream is included in it. An even older city dump is closer to the falls on the southeast side. Moreover, it appears that the entire area, unofficially perhaps, had been used for dumping for a very long time.⁴

What sort of process, I wondered, would lead a community to treat with such disrespect this little natural spectacle? Surely not one that was open and publicly articulated. One is tempted to look for a few powerful villains to blame, but when some part of a landscape is hidden, and that concealment is taken for granted, more than a few individuals obviously are involved.

Walking through the contaminated valley that leads to the waterfall, I thought of those people on the bridges in the center of Lockport staring into the canal basin. Did they know there was another valley, a dark twin (fig. 1.3)? In some ways these two valleys seem opposite: one the focus of human activity, the other almost untrodden; one the city's heart, the other

a kind of wilderness. Yet it would be a mistake to call one artificial and one natural. No humans carved the Gulf, but the city and its people thoroughly haunt the place.

The fact that the Gulf—with its juxtaposition of natural beauty and toxic waste—had faded from local consciousness struck me in two ways. On the one hand, it resonated with legends long circulating in local popular culture that Lockport's landscape contained a mystery. On the other hand, it seemed to present an anomaly to the usual upbeat story I had always been told about Lockport's genesis and its nature. These considerations, along with my position as a former native who happened to be a historical researcher, gradually compelled me to begin a scholarly investigation.

The story of Lockport we heard at civic events and in local classrooms focused on a single symbolic moment. In the twentieth century,

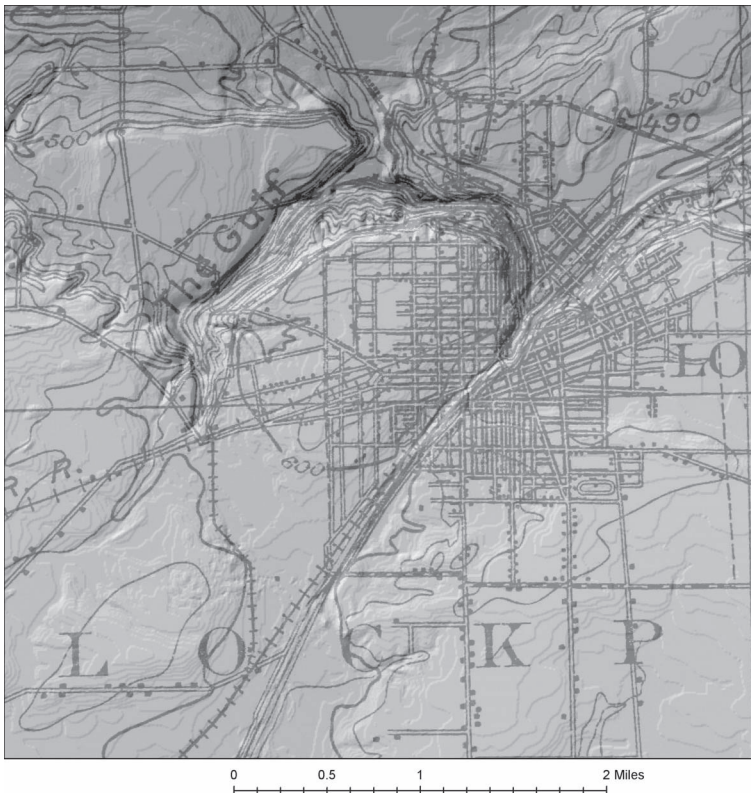


Figure 1.3. Topographic map of Lockport overlain on digital elevation model (United States Geological Survey). Map by Cherin Abdel Samie and Yasser Ayad.



Figure 1.4. *Opening of the Erie Canal, Oct. 26, 1825*, mural by Raphael Beck. Niagara County Historical Society. Used with permission.

many Lockport natives first encountered this symbolic moment through a monumental mural that covered the wall of a downtown bank lobby. The mural, painted by Raphael Beck, a Lockport artist of regional notoriety, is titled *Opening of the Erie Canal, Oct. 26, 1825* (fig. 1.4). The Lockport Exchange Trust Company had commissioned the work at the time of the centennial of the canal's opening and unveiled it at the dedication of its new building in 1928. Beck's mural impressed me every time I entered the bank as a child in the 1950s. Its sheer size and grandiose tone convinced me that the scene depicted must be one of importance. The setting, even to a child, was unmistakable.

The key event Beck's mural depicts is the conquest of the Niagara Escarpment—the final obstacle to the completion of the Erie Canal—and the seemingly instantaneous creation of an urban landscape that, as its name implies, was born of the same event. This was Lockport's moment. Here

the Erie Canal had been completed and the waters joined. Even before the canal's opening, many people began to interpret both the event and the place symbolically. From various points of view, they commented on the value and meaning of human (and American) ingenuity and skill, technological and economic advancement and, more generally, progress—always in relation to nature, and in the context of continental power. The moment itself remained the reference point for an ongoing dialogue about Lockport and about these larger issues.

Beck's mural emphasized the nationalistic connotations of Lockport's moment: the flags at the top of the locks point west into the continent's interior. The canal unites that vast undeveloped land to the nation's largest city: Lockport's moment is also a critical New York moment. The flags in the foreground and in the distance show a country, if not yet a continent, knit together by a work of human artifice: an American moment.

Beck's quintessentially progressive view of Lockport's moment is by far the most common perspective expressed in about 180 years of written and pictorial interpretation of the Lock City. Particularly in the three decades that followed the meeting of the waters at Lockport in 1825, the dialogue about the meaning of the event was public and intertextual. It was an exchange that caught up questions about progress, nature, and America's continental destiny—questions that, though of immediate import to New Yorkers of the 1820s and 1830s, continue to resonate today even beyond North America. The presence of Niagara Falls, just eighteen miles to the west, loomed over this dialogue, a natural benchmark from which to assess the town and its artificial river. This was a dialogue among residents and visitors, rich and poor, men and women. Middle-class white men dominated the most visible and prestigious forms of communication. This group included engineers, industrialists, military officers, businessmen, journalists, historians, writers, and artists. They expressed their views not only through public speaking and published writing but also through their power to shape the urban landscape itself. Laborers and other less privileged people participated as well, but it was often their actions, rather than their words, that did the talking.

If Lockport's moment signaled progress to most observers, there were also a number of Jeremiahs who questioned whether the benefits of progress were worth the costs. Many of the laborers who actually dug the ditch and built the locks were killed or maimed in the process. Did the canal bring progressive opportunities to their lives? Two major riots in Lockport during construction suggest the opposite. These events, too, are part of the dialogue on Lockport's moment. The lower right side of Beck's mural depicts a group of Indians and workers with their tools. The picture's narrative structure leaves no doubt about whom Beck thinks deserves credit for the canal: it is not the men who actually built it, but the middle-class gentlemen who imagined and

designed it, and, indeed, who would principally profit from it. One worker seems to be waving cheerfully, resigned perhaps to his lower, peripheral, and shadowy position. But, as every Lockportian knows, this dark laborer stands on the slope that leads to Lowertown, a district that, from the Civil War to the mid-1970s at least, was Lockport's closest approximation to an immigrant ghetto, home in Beck's day to an Italian and African American working class. To paint a more honest picture of Lockport's moment, we must attend to the shadows it casts and listen for the voices of those who speak without words or hope of being heard.

In the progressive narrative Beck's mural constructs, the Lockport locks become a stairway to empire. Yet this was not just a story. Completing the Erie Canal helped to secure the country's hegemony in the interior of the continent, and it played a key role in sparking the market revolution that transformed the economic and social structure of the United States.⁵ The practical effects of the canal are indisputable—it was a stairway to empire—but the progressive narrative about the canal is built upon exclusions and elisions. For Native American groups and Canadians, the hegemony of the United States was hardly a thing to celebrate. For the largely immigrant common laborers who made up the bulk of the canal construction force, the market revolution was a brutal reality within which they had little leverage or hope. Moreover, as pawns in the new transnational wage economy, they were scarcely more self-identified with the United States—a country that hardly embraced them—than were the Canadians twenty miles to the west.

Then there is the question of the Gulf, the dark twin of the scene Beck's mural celebrates. These two places have a parallel yet paradoxical relationship that prompts me to ask counterfactual questions: if only slightly different decisions had been made, what kind of city, or even continent, might have developed? In a sense, these possible worlds are part of Lockport's moment too. Between the crevices of the actual, we can glimpse the background of possibilities out of which it, far from inevitably, emerged. Because, as Roland Barthes suggests, culture tends to convert history into nature,⁶ *what is* can eventually appear *destined to be*, as if no real human choices were involved—in a word, natural—yet it is no more so than the untried possibilities.

This book is an attempt to examine the event and the place Beck's mural depicts. It is the story of a human achievement, but an achievement that has generated shadows and ghosts. Rather than directly fragmenting the progressive story of the achievement, I want to hold it together with what it excludes: the hidden, lost, and counterfactual stories of Lockport. My process is one of excavating beneath the layers of naturalness and inevitability, in an attempt to reveal the human agency, and the human responsibility.

The key events of the 1820s that initiated Lockport's brief moment of prominence form the hub of this book. The next chapter situates these events in a geographical, historical, and cultural context and examines the decisions involved in routing the canal through western New York. Chapter 3 explores the five-year-long struggle to overcome the Niagara Escarpment and complete the canal. Chapter 4 examines the meanings people saw in Lockport's landscape, especially as articulated in words and images during the celebrations that marked the canal's opening and in the following decades of its heyday. The final chapter considers the impact of the canal's completion upon the place where it was completed. Using Lockport as an example that mirrors broader cultural transformations, chapter 5 traces a distinct set of issues and incidents connected to that event.

Had I not been born in Lockport, I would most likely never have stumbled upon the puzzling issues this book attempts to unravel. Yet, despite my efforts to apprehend them as completely as possible, I cannot pretend to stand apart on some neutral ground. Fortunately, one does not have to be detached to be honest. The town that I experienced growing up in the 1950s and 1960s still reverberated with the echoes of what Joyce calls its "inceptions and originals." Yet when we try to discover what is here and why it is here, we find not historical necessities but possibilities: "all is hidden when we would backward see from what region of remoteness the whatness of our whoness has fetched his whenceness."⁷